Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident

Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident

38 | 2014
La Guerre en perspective : histoire et culture militaire en Chine

Discovering War in Chinese History

Redécouvrir la guerre dans l'histoire chinoise

在中國歷史中發現戰爭

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OpenEdition Journals

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/extremeorient/370
DOI: 10.4000/extremeorient.370
ISSN: 2108-7105

Publisher
Presses universitaires de Vincennes

Printed version
Date of publication: 1 November 2014
Number of pages: 21-46
ISBN: 978-2-84292-414-0
ISSN: 0754-5010

Electronic reference
Peter Lorge, « Discovering War in Chinese History », *Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident* [Online], 38 | 2014, Online since 01 January 2017, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/extremeorient/370 ; DOI : 10.4000/extremeorient.370

Discovering War in Chinese History

Peter Lorge

War in China played a significant role in the rise and fall of states and empires, the personal fortunes of individuals, and developments in science and technology. It was therefore extremely consequential in many areas of history, influencing ideas, culture and even the arts. Chinese warfare was neither unique nor uniform across its history, of course, making generalizations regarding a "Chinese way in warfare" difficult or even deceptive. To further complicate matters, the study of Chinese military history has been subject to a number of Chinese and Western biases in the 20th and 21st centuries. Finally, the discipline of military history has also undergone a series of shifts in practice and perspective, some quite recently. Yet China has remained important in many debates within military history because its well-documented and lengthy history has made it the natural comparison for theories of Western development, where China is compared to "the West" as if these were equivalent historiographical units.

What most of the modern perspectives, both in the West and China, have shared until very recently is their fundamental belief that war was not important in Chinese history. China's political, economic, technological and military weakness in the 19th and 20th centuries was projected back onto the entire sweep of Chinese history and erroneously transmogrified from a military and technological mischaracterization into a fundamental aspect of Chinese culture. While China's scientific and technological history began to be explored, most notably by Joseph Needham, in the middle of the 20th century, China's military history only began to receive the same serious attention starting in the 1990s. Chinese military history is therefore an extremely young field that offers the possibility of radically reshaping our understanding of Chinese history and culture in general.

The erroneous notion that there is a Chinese way in warfare lies at the heart of the misunderstanding of Chinese military history. It is, however, important

to distinguish clearly the writing of abstract texts on military thought and the intellectual history of those texts from the history of actual warfare at a given time and place. Military thought has its own history and its relationship to battlefield operations is not straightforward. Military thinking in the form of texts may lag, directly reflect, or be ahead of the military practice of the period in which a given text is written. The abstract thinking of one period may or may not be relevant to the study of a different period. This is no less true in China than anywhere else.

Military history is based upon historical texts recording actual battles, court debates on military policy and strategy, archaeology and theoretical texts. Both military thought and military history are primarily textually based areas of study, but they are not interchangeable. Military thought, based upon a specific corpus of technical works (*e.g.* Sunzi's *Art of* War) is an abstraction; military history, based upon historical documents that may include abstract technical works is an attempt to understand concrete military aspects of history. I will, therefore, explain how Western scholars have come to emphasize Chinese military thought rather than military history in their construction of Chinese attitudes toward war. I will then discuss changes in both the study of military history generally, and Chinese military history particularly, that I believe will lead to a new and better understanding of the place of war in Chinese history.

The Chinese way in warfare

The greatest obstacle to understanding the role of war in Chinese history is the concept of "the Chinese way in warfare." This is the ahistorical notion that Chinese culture has a single fundamental "way" of war that is and was unique and uniform across all time and space. Reduced to Confucius (or Mencius) and Sunzi as the civil and martial intellectual exemplars, respectively, of Chinese civilization, this essentialist perspective sees civil thinkers as resolutely anti-military and military thinkers emphasizing indirection, stratagem and limitations. In 1974, Frank Kierman and John Fairbank coedited a volume titled "Chinese Ways in Warfare" which was the product of a conference at MIT sponsored by Harvard University on Chinese military history. Their goal was both reasonable and modest, "to show facets of the Chinese military style and tradition," given that, "Among China's contributions to today's world is a distinctive military record that had been too little studied."[1]

1. Kierman & Fairbank (1974): 1.

Fairbank argued in the introduction that China's history, geography and traditions are different from the West and that, consequently, the Chinese way of warfare must also be different than the West's. Quite naturally, he turns to the corpus of Warring States Period texts to support his view:

> The *Sun-tzu* (Sunzi) became a classic that summed up the ancient military advisers' accumulated wisdom as to how warfare should be conducted, through what means and toward what ends. Placed beside his contemporary the *Mencius*, the *Sun-tzu's* emphasis on unsettling the mind and upsetting the plans of one's opponent obviously shares the early Confucian assumption as to the primacy of mental attitudes in human affairs. Like the other classics produced by idealists amid the disorder of the Warring States, it bequeathed its doctrines to the far different imperial age.[2]

Fairbank's perspective is consistent with a 20th century reading of Chinese culture and the role of war in that culture (barring a few notable late 20th century scholars). It is not, however, consistent with a pre-20th century reading of the texts of Confucius and Sunzi.

Confucius, one of the most important figures in Chinese history, is shown in *The Analects* downplaying the importance of warfare, thus providing a *locus classicus* for anti-military sentiment. The strongest statement against war in *The Analects* is how seldom it presents Confucius discussing it. At a minimum, Confucius accepted the need for warfare, but placed it in a subordinate position:

> Zigong asked about governing.
> The Master said, 'Simply make sure there is sufficient food, sufficient armaments, and that you have the confidence of the people.'
> Zigong said, 'If sacrificing one of these three things became unavoidable, which would you sacrifice first?'
> The Master replied, 'I would sacrifice the armaments.'
> Zigong said, 'If sacrificing one of the two remaining things became unavoidable, which would you sacrifice next?'
> The Master replied, 'I would sacrifice the food. Death has always been with us, but a state cannot stand once it has lost the confidence of the people.'[3]

War, warriors or the value of military action are only discussed in a few other places. In chapter 14 of *The Analects* Confucius notes in one section that the great archer Yi and the great naval commander Ao did not die natural deaths,

2. Kierman & Fairbank (1974): 5.
3. Slingerland (2003): 128.

though further on in the same chapter he allows some degree of moral latitude for the great minister Guan Zhong because he brought peace to the world by making Duke Huan Hegemon.[4] In chapter 15 of *The Analects*, Confucius states that he, "never learned about the arrangement of battalions and divisions."[5] In an unsettled age where war was a constant problem, Confucius sought to bring order through morality and proper behavior.

Confucius' position on warfare has been regarded as both prescriptive and descriptive, despite his putative (though now understood to be erroneous) editing of *The Spring and Autumn Annals*, a historical text full of war and conflict.[6] By contrast, in the Western tradition, the anti-violence stance of a figure like Jesus Christ and dozens of major religious and philosophical thinkers of a similar bent has not been used to characterize Western culture as non-military. Few Christians would describe their religion as fundamentally violent, even when discussing the Crusades. Western scholars can easily accommodate the actions of a few medieval European political and religious leaders promoting violence in the name of Christianity without changing the underlying characterization of Christianity or Western culture as a whole. The same does not hold true of China.

In contrast to Confucius, Sunzi, the putative author of a text on warfare from approximately the same time period, directly addressed the issues of war. Sunzi and the Chinese intellectual tradition of writing about war fairly consistently argue against the unthinking and irrational rush to battle. Sunzi argues first and foremost at the very beginning of the text that: "War is a great matter of the state, the place of life and death, the way of existence and destruction, it cannot not be investigated."[7] And indeed the first chapter is titled "calculations," thus insisting upon the importance of thinking about war before undertaking a campaign. The Sunzi text as it has come down to us is actually arranged logically, and it is no accident that it begins by arguing that one must think about war itself. At the same time, however, despite Sunzi's many caveat's and warnings about warfare, he assumes both that it will happen and that it can accomplish certain things. Sunzi is not an advocate for peace or against war, he is for waging war intelligently because it is a matter of life and death.

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4. Slingerland (2003): 155, and 160-161.
5. Slingerland (2003): 174.
6. For Mencius' comment that Confucius composed *The Spring and Autumn Annals*, Lau (1970): 114.
7. *Songben Shiyi Jiazhu* Sunzi: 405-406.

Even if we consider his well-known statement later in the same chapter that: "War is the way of cunning," it is equally apparent that this is further reinforcement of his main point. Just as importantly, the commentators collected in the 13th century compilation of eleven commentaries on the Sunzi felt it necessary to amplify and clarify that relatively clear statement. Their commentary is particularly telling given that the subsequent passages in Sunzi explains his point about cunning by saying that: "Therefore, able but showing that one is unable, acting but showing one is not acting, near but showing one is far, far but showing one is near…" To which the commentators add:

> Cao Cao: War is without constant configuration; proceed by deception and cunning.
> Li Quan: The army does not reject deception.
> Mei Yaochen: Without wiles one cannot use power, without power one cannot control the enemy.
> Wang Xi: In order to seek victory over the enemy the deceptive must be credible in managing the masses.
> Zhang Yu: Although benevolence and righteousness are the foundation of using troops, their victory must be seized by cunning and deception. Thus, the technique of dragging brushwood was Yang Zhuluan's wiles; Ten thousand crossbows of Qi fired in Sun Bin's unorthodox [plan]; the stampede of a thousand cattle together was Tian Dan's [use of] power.[8] These are all using the way of cunning to control victory.[9]

These comments break down into two groups. The first group, Cao Cao, Li Quan and Mei Yaochen, insist upon the importance of cunning. By themselves, their comments seem banal, merely further supporting Sunzi. The fact that they feel it necessary to reinforce Sunzi on this point is, however, telling. The reason for their reinforcement is explained in the second group of commentators, Wang Xi and Zhang Yu. Both Wang and Zhang explain two aspects of command, the moral character of the commander and cunning in battlefield tactics. The insistence upon cunning is the result of a clash between morality and intellect. Moral behavior is not inherently intellectual, and indeed is often at odds with rational thought. Prizing survival over morality could be seen as rational calculation. Mencius famously put morality above survival, at least for the gentleman, seeing it as an existential issue for someone claiming to be a gentleman:

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8. This is the story of Tian Dan breaking the Yan siege of Jimo, a Qi city, by using a stampede of cattle.
9. *Songben Shiyi Jiazhu Sunzi*: 421.

> Mencius said, "Fish is what I want; bear's palm is also what I want. If I cannot have both, I would rather take bear's palm then fish. Life is what I want; dutifulness is also what I want. If I cannot have both, I would rather take dutifulness than life. On the one hand, though life is what I want, there is something I want more than life. That is why I do not cling to life at all costs. On the other hand, though death is what I loathe, there is something I loathe more than death."[10]
>
> Similarly, Mencius explicitly condemned a ruler seeking "profit [literally 'advantage']" as contrary to good governance.[11]

Of course advantage is the basis of military activity. Moreover, where morality, credibility, humaneness, righteousness and the like are claimed to be the more effective means of leadership, they do not, in and of themselves, cause one's enemies to do what you want. This directly contrasts Confucian ideas of the power of morality: "If you desire goodness, then the common people will be good. The Virtue of a gentleman is like the wind, and the Virtue of a petty person is like the grass-when the wind moves over the grass, the grass is sure to bend."[12] From the Confucian perspective morality is a functional tool to win people over to one's side. Thinking about ways to trick or deceive one's opponent in order to achieve victory is incompatible with simply doing the right thing. Thus for the more Confucian commentators like Wang Xi and Zhang Yu, their knowledge that one must be cunning and calculating (remember that this is a chapter titled "calculations") to succeed in war must somehow be integrated with their firm belief that morality is the basis of leadership.

By contrast, the first group of commentators is in fact addressing a different reader. Wang Xi and Zhang Yu are trying to allay Confucian readers' discomfort with the use of cunning. Our first group is insisting upon cunning not because of issues of Confucian morality, but because of issues of military mentality. The first group reflects the fundamental problem of military texts: that they are intellectual discussions of a practice, warfare, often populated and commanded by men hostile to thinking. Cao Cao and his group are trying to convince generals to think carefully about what they are doing and to try and outwit their opponents. At the same time, they are making the similar point that even if you don't use your brain, your opponent might. He might outwit you and you will lose.

The preceding discussion presents a small number of examples of how Chinese thinkers from a variety of perspectives discussed war. They were

10. Lau (1970): 166.
11. Lau (1970): 49.
12. Slingerland (2003): 134.

concerned about its effects, and the precedence that a ruler or general might give to using force, but they did not oppose war completely or expect that it would disappear. Military thinkers argued for careful thinking and emphasized the limitations of warfare. At the same time, later commentators read and interpreted the significance of Sunzi passages in different manners. If Sunzi, the paradigmatic foundational text of Chinese military thought, was read and understood differently at different times, then it seems impossible that it could be taken as a single, constant expression of a Chinese way in war.

Of course, all early written texts on warfare, whether Aineias Tacticus' *How to Survive Under Siege*, or Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus' *Epitome of Military Science* are by definition more considered approaches to fighting.[13] Given the limited levels of literacy in pre-modern times, and the general disinclination of many military men to read much even today, we cannot take written discussions of warfare as normative or directly descriptive even for their own time. These texts describe a perspective on warfare that was open to interpretation. Succeeding generations of readers understood military texts, just as they understood religious or philosophical texts, differently at different times.

The myopia about anti-military sentiments by Western writers and even statesmen or rulers alerts us to the interpretive bias displayed by both foreign and Chinese historians concerning Chinese history. Where anti-military statements in the West are placed in context, whether religious, philosophical, or political, in China any anti-military statement is read transparently as yet another affirmation of China's non-military culture. The far more extensive tradition of Chinese military thought is simply disregarded, or interpreted as supporting the non-military orientation. Vegetius *Epitome of Military Science* also warns against charging into battle, but this is not used to argue for a Western aversion to battle. "For good generals do not attack in open battle where the danger is mutual, but do it always from a hidden position, so as to kill or at least terrorize the enemy while their own men are unharmed as far as possible."[14] Since Chinese history does not appear to have been any less warlike or any more peaceful than that of any other place, it would be hard to argue that China's culture is significantly more non-military than the West's if one was aware of China's extensive military history.

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13. Aineias the Tactician, *How to Survive Under Siege*; Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus, *Epitome of Military Science*. We might also include Fontinus' *Strategems*, Aelian's *Tactics*, and Modestus' *On terms of military science*.
14. Vegetius, *Epitome*, 80.

Ignorance of China's military history is therefore a necessary precondition for these misconceptions. Conversely, knowledge of Chinese military history, putting war back into China's history, undermines the notion of China as a non-military or anti-military culture. This is not to say that China did not have a long, extensive and rich history of writers and thinkers opposed to war. Most ordinary Chinese people preferred to live in peace. But this was true in the West as well, along with the rest of the world. The centrality or distinctiveness of this myth of China's non-military culture in some people's conception of what Chinese culture is must be re-evaluated in light of its actual military history.

Texts on war and war itself

Fairbank was explicit in positing a different Chinese approach to warfare, and, of course, Basil Liddell Hart had used Samuel Griffith's translation of Sunzi to support his own "indirect method" by claiming it was consistent with ancient Chinese practice.[15] For people like Hart, Sunzi was another thinker to enlist in his campaign against Clausewitz, whose thinking he blamed for the carnage of World War One. Hart's interpretation of Sunzi as arguing for an indirect method generally persists in the Western view of both Sunzi and Chinese warfare overall. The Sunzi versus Clausewitz paradigm created a neat indirect Chinese versus direct Western schema. Of course Clausewitz's *On War* was published posthumously in 1842, making his supposed direct method a relatively recent and modern approach. It would take a classicist to connect Clausewitz's direct method to ancient Greece and thus make it a fundamental characteristic of western warfare.

Victor Davis Hanson, a classicist, forcefully argued in his 1989 book *The Western Way of War* for the idea that there is a specifically Western way of war stemming from the particular mode of ancient Greek hoplite warfare.[16] The western way of war was connected to the "Great Hoplite Narrative" whereby the birth of hoplite warfare in ancient Greece led to the invention of democracy.[17] Like the simplified characterization of Chinese culture as non-military based upon the reading of Warring States Period texts, *The Western Way of Warfare* attempted to prove that because ancient Greeks fought in a particular manner, all subsequent Western armies fought that way, at least when they were successful. The ones that were unsuccessful did not fight that way.

15. Griffith (1963): vi-vii.
16. Hanson (1989).
17. For the "Great Hoplite Narrative," see Kagan & Viggiano (2013): xi-xiv.

The Ancient Greek case that Hanson uses to argue for a Western way of war is not based upon theoretical texts like the Sunzi or even Aineias Tacticus' *How to Survive Under Siege*. This was not a methodological choice, but rather something forced upon him by the overall lack of extant Ancient Greek texts on military thought. Hanson turned to archaeology, some histories, and visual evidence from pottery to prove his case. Generations of classicists have devoted immense effort to trying to understand how the ancient Greeks fought, with considerable creativity and conjecture used to connect the fragmentary evidence. Hanson's position was that democratic, yeoman farmers preferred to fight brief, sharp and direct battles with similarly armed yeoman farmers in head on infantry clashes that would be quickly resolved. Thus, in the West, Hanson believes, direct, head on warfare was stressed. Also, since this was, in his opinion, the most effective way of warfare, the West defeated non-Westerners in battle for the rest of history because its "classic" mode of warfare just happened to be the best way to fight.

Leaving aside the many obvious weaknesses of such an argument, and recent scholarship that has completely undermined Hanson's characterization of hoplite warfare and its social context, the Western way of warfare thesis reduced Western warfare into an ahistorical abstraction similar to that of the Chinese way in war.[18] Hanson's thesis also neatly dovetails with Hart's position on Clausewitz, reinforcing it and, by extension, Hart's reading of Sunzi, since China is the paradigmatic counterpoint to the West. Both the military characterization of the West and the military characterization of China are poorly founded in data on virtually every level, from textual analysis to historical events, but they remain compelling for the simplicity of their schema. Hanson's argument has not been very influential in the broader field of western military history outside of his own writings, popular general texts, and the specific area of ancient Greek military history. This is probably because western military history is well provided with detailed studies that do not find his work relevant to other times and places.

The notion that there is a Chinese way in war or way of war has been extremely influential. This is true both in Chinese studies and in comparative studies of warfare. Unlike the military history of the west, Chinese military history is quite poorly studied. Even after the publication of *Chinese Ways in Warfare*, very few military histories for any period of Chinese history were published. In contrast, many people published translations of Sunzi. Most translators provided only very general overviews of the meaning of Sunzi and tended to follow the Fairbank/Hart lines of a different and indirect way

18. For the new scholarship see, Kagan & Viggiano (2013).

interpretation of Sunzi.[19] Thus a particular interpretation of one, albeit central, text was substituted for the lack of histories.

John Keegan, one of the great popular military historians of the later 20th century and a strong supporter of Victor Davis Hanson, based his characterization of Chinese military practice on a narrow reading of Sunzi, and described Sunzi's principles as: "all concepts recognized to be profoundly anti-Clausewitzian by twentieth-century strategists, when the campaigns of Mao Tse-tung and Ho Chi Minh drew Sun Tzu to their attention."[20] Keegan relies for this characterization on Chen Ya-tien's, *Chinese Military Theory*.[21] Chen's book was primarily concerned with explaining the military theories of Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong in the 20th century, but he did devote part of his book to introducing classical Chinese military thought. Regardless of the limited value of that introduction itself and the work's drawbacks, it is clearly a text on, as it states in its title, military theory. It is Keegan who then extends his reading to place it in opposition to Clausewitzian concepts (It is worth noting that Keegan was extremely hostile to Clausewitz, so he perhaps thought that he was praising the Chinese).

Keegan goes on to discuss Fairbank's "Chinese Way of Warfare" while accurately citing the title of the book as *Chinese Ways in Warfare* in his notes.[22] The move from Fairbank's plural "ways" to Keegan's singular "way" is not hard to justify from Fairbank's introduction, but it is still clear that Fairbank was attempting to bring coherence to a set of chapters unconnected in time and disparate in conclusions. Hence the "ways" of *Chinese Ways in Warfare* were the individual chapters rendering sample pieces of China's military history. Abstracted through Fairbank's introductory lens, however, they became support for a simplified explanation of that same history.

At no point, however, do Keegan or Fairbank prove a connection between military thought and military practice. Both assumed that practice followed theoretical texts, or that theoretical texts simply reflected actual practice. Fairbank, as quoted above, imagined that Sunzi was the distillation of the wisdom of ancient Chinese warfare. While it might be possible to argue that practice followed theoretical texts at some time and place with some specific text or texts, proving it would required evidence linking thought and practice.

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19. See Alastair Iain Johnston's telling remark that, "In large measure the problems of this literature stem from a heavy reliance on Sun Zi's *Art of War* as the textual basis of Chinese strategic culture." Johnston (1995): 26.
20. Keegan (1993): 202.
21. Chen Ya-tien (1992): 21-30.
22. Keegan (1993): 214.

And even if it could be proven in a specific instance, that proof could not be generalized to all of Chinese history and all military texts without further event-by-event and text-by-text proof.

The prerequisite for a proof of a connection between theoretical texts and military practice would be a comprehensive, deep and high-quality analysis of the entire corpus of the texts of Chinese military thought, and a similar quality account of Chinese military history, including battle accounts, court strategy debates and so on. Absent these prerequisites, it is methodologically unsound, or at least a highly tenuous process, to attempt to connect military texts and actual military practice. Given the current state of the field, such a standard effectively precludes any such activity for many years to come.

Left unsaid in all of these discussions are a number of highly significant problems. There is no proposed or accepted definition of who is "Chinese" and who is not, what territory we should consider "China" and what is foreign, or even which dynasties are Chinese. Joanna Waley-Cohen, for example, showed very clearly that the Manchu rulers of the Qing dynasty strongly emphasized their martial accomplishments.[23] With regard to the texts and their audience, we have no sense of the role of literacy in connecting texts to practice, or even how accessible military texts were to generals. Lastly, we do not know what was contained in the hundreds of no longer extant texts.

All of these problems highlight the difficulties of proving a clear connection between theory and practice. Even without these considerations, there is no particular reason to expect a single Chinese way in war, at least at an abstract level, instead of changes in military practice, different practices among different ethnic groups and even shifts at different stages in a dynasty's life cycle. Rather than assume that a single way of warfare is natural, the opposite is more likely. There is no single philosophical tradition in China, so we should not assume that there is a single strand of military thought.

One way to resolve these issues would be to define being Chinese by adherence to a circumscribed manner of warfare. Those who fight in a particular way are Chinese, and those who do not are not Chinese. More narrowly, we might define Chinese people as those who perceive and write about war in a "Chinese" way. Both of these definitions would require us to place a way of fighting or thinking about war at the center of Chinese identity or culture. Even if we were willing to take such a bizarre position, it might still run into difficulties in distinguishing between groups within Chinese society. Since Chinese society has never been uniform and monolithic at even a single point in time, there would likely be very different attitudes about warfare among

23. Waley-Cohen (2006).

farmers, city dwellers, literati, merchants, and so on. Different attitudes would also distribute across the landscape as people living in border areas might well perceive warfare differently than those in the interior. Relying upon what was written alone subjects us to intellectual and rhetorical traditions, as well as the political and military circumstances of the writer.

Setting aside the current impossibility of a comprehensive approach to the problem, there are two alternative approaches worth arguing for, or at least searching for, a single Chinese way of warfare. Both are effectively shortcuts, or efforts to resolve the question of a Chinese way in war without complete information. One approach would be to find a consistent abstract approach to warfare in Chinese military texts. This was the method used by Alastair Iain Johnston in his 1995 book, *Cultural Realism*.[24] The other approach would be to analyze a sample of Chinese military history and find a consistent strategic, operational or battlefield practice across time in different Chinese dynasties. This was the method used by Yuan-Kang Wang in his 2011 book, *Harmony and War*.[25]

Johnston and Wang are both political scientists so their approaches to the question of a Chinese way in warfare are driven by the methodological and functional demands of their field. Their books fall on either side of the question of whether culture matters in decision-making and international relations, or whether all people make rational choices to maximize their expected returns regardless of culture. In functional terms, their work attempts to describe the Chinese way in warfare in such a way that it assists predictive models of Chinese military behavior. As a social scientific endeavor both works assume fundamentally that some sort of unifying, consistent process must be at work, even if what we currently believe may be proven wrong. None of this is important to the *historical* examination of Chinese ways in warfare, which does not require a simple "scientific" answer and has no predictive requirement. Thus, while Johnston and Wang's books are important because they contribute to the general debate, they are works of political science that unsurprisingly fail in the historical realm.

Johnston's *Cultural Realism* is based upon an analysis of *The Seven Military Classics* and the grand strategic preferences of the Ming dynasty against the Mongols. He concludes that Chinese strategic culture is, "-rooted in historically constructed and socially learned assumptions about the strategic environment and appropriate responses to it."[26] While Johnston is surely

24. Johnston (1995).
25. Yuan-Kang Wang (2011).
26. Johnston(1995): 28.

correct in his overall position, his analysis relies upon a careful analysis of *The Seven Military Classics* to abstract a model of Chinese strategic preferences. Despite his excellent historical discussion of the creation of *The Seven Military Classics*, he is unaware of the very specific strategic context under which *The Seven Military Classics* was compiled.[27] Only the texts attributed to Sunzi and Wu Qi were unquestionably classics before the completion of *The Seven Military Classics* in 1083. The other five texts only became classics after their inclusion in the compilation.

The choice of texts included in *The Seven Military Classics* as well as their particular ordering within the manual argued for a strategy of limited warfare and the subordination of military officers to civil control. A distinctly Confucian bias is evident in the manual, which is not surprising when we consider that it was created to educate officers in both strategy and loyalty. *The Seven Military Classics* was a manual of military thought created by a civil bureaucracy for a stable dynasty that could not expect to make major territorial gains. It was not a manual for establishing a dynasty. Johnston points out that *The Seven Military Classics* was extremely influential after the Song, both as part of a military education system in the Ming dynasty, and as the core reading on military thought for civil officials. This is an important point that argues that the particular late 11th century Song dynasty court bias in military thought became an important, possibly dominant, strand of Chinese military thought in the succeeding centuries.

Johnston does not stop at distilling grand strategic preferences from *The Seven MilitaryClassics*; he tests those preferences against the actions of the Ming dynasty court. Johnston finds a second important strand of military thought that he terms "Mencian" in reference to the Confucian philosopher Mencius. This strand of thinking posits that war is the result of internal moral failings at court. It has rhetorical power, but is not operational. Johnston's work on *The Seven Military Classics* fails because it assumes both that the text fairly represents all of Chinese military thinking, and that the interpretation of the larger text and its constituent parts was not subject to change. His analysis of the Ming court's decisions fails because it assumes that policy decisions are purely based upon preferences generated by military thought. Many of the policy decisions at the Ming court, as with those of other dynasties, were made because of internal political considerations. This was true in military policy and civil policy.

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27. Johnston's position is consistent with that of the Chinese scholarship he relied upon for the creation and meaning of *The Seven Military Classics*.

In sharp contrast to Johnston, in *Harmony and War* Yuan-Kang Wang analyzes the military history of the Song and Ming dynasties and concludes that both dynasties practiced *realpolitik* military policies. Wang's methodology is sounder than Johnston's, but his conclusions less supportable. He finds that the Song and Ming courts made decisions in line with a structural realist approach to military policy unaffected by Confucian culture. This is to say that emperors and statesmen evaluated the costs, risks, benefits and chances of success for military action in deciding what policies to pursue. While Wang is correct in discounting the notion of a non-military Chinese culture, his removal of culture entirely substantially misreads court debates.

Wang does an admirable job of grasping the secondary historical scholarship on the military histories of the Song and Ming dynasties. As with Johnston, his social science approach requires him to find a single, consistent way of making policy decisions across centuries. This requirement must either elide those decisions that clearly were affected by culture, or rationalize that decision-making was on average based upon structural realist principles. Any cultural concerns expressed by statesmen and rulers must be taken as mere window dressing on the core realist arguments. It is one thing, however, to argue that policy makers were intelligent and rational when making momentous decisions for the dynasty. It is quite another to argue that their culture and their cultural values did not play a significant role in their decisions.

For political scientists, the significance of Wang's work is that it allows analysts to evaluate current Chinese policies through structural realism. Chinese leaders are rational actors who make decisions in the same manner as rational leaders in other countries. The challenge is only to understand their motivations rather than their values. By this reading, the Chinese are not inherently anti-military, defensive-minded, or passive. They simply try, objectively, to get the best deal they can out of the circumstances.

For Wang, changes in culture, different interpretations of texts, or the shifting priorities of a dynasty over its lifespan are irrelevant. The key point is that Chinese leaders are always structural realists just as structural realist theories posit. This assumption also means that Wang can generalize from his historical sample without needing to be comprehensive. With a large enough sample size he can credibly extrapolate for all of Chinese history.

Both Johnston and Wang's arguments are partly correct. Chinese statesmen were not inherently or culturally anti-military, defensive-minded or passive. But culture did and does matter. Not just history and military texts affected policy decisions, but also the perception of history and military texts. Just as significantly, neither Johnston nor Wang resolves the matter of what constitutes China or Chinese culture. Ming political and military culture was deeply

affected by Mongol culture. Ming military policy focused on the Mongol threat for most of the dynasty, but was brought down by a new Manchu power. Ming efforts to put down internal rebellions failed in the late Ming dynasty, but much of that was due to vicious partisan politics at court.

Inaccurate generalizations about a Chinese way in war have been repeated and reified by repeated translations of texts of Chinese military thought, particularly Sunzi, and the basic social science demands of political science. John Fairbanks' need to generalize about Chinese warfare in the introduction of *Chinese Ways in Warfare* matched the needs of non-specialists like John Keegan for a single, short, clear characterization. Once thus simplified, Chinese warfare could be safely ignored, and its long history set aside. Similarly, Chinese military thought was simplified into a single, unchanging position. Functionally then, the idea of a Chinese way in warfare is an intellectual and methodological dead end.

Military history

If we are to discover the role war played in Chinese history we must set aside the search for a single Chinese way of warfare. Chinese military historians have already begun applying the discipline of military history developed in Western scholarship to the study of Chinese history. This development has been extremely fruitful in recent research, and has in turn brought Chinese military history into the current debates within the discipline of military history. In many respects, Chinese military history has been more accepted and more influential in the field of military history than in the field of Chinese history, though that is also changing.[28] The major insight that Chinese military history adds to global military history, Western military history and Chinese history is that war was also significant in China. This new research on Chinese military history is now contributing to ongoing changes in the discipline of military history as it moves away from its purely Western roots.

The study of Chinese military history has also contributed to two major, very recent, shifts in military history, involving the Western Way in Warfare thesis and the Military Revolution thesis. In order to contextualize these changes, and to lay out the current advances in Chinese history, in this section I

28. The reasons for the different receptions are not clear. Partly it is simply due to the individuals involved, partly to the specific interest of certain prominent military historians like Geoffrey Parker, Jeremy Black, and Stephen Morillo, in using a broader range of comparative examples.

will first provide a brief overview of some relevant aspects of western military history. I will then turn to Chinese military history, and its future possibilities.

The study of military history has changed markedly over the 20th century, with new methods, approaches and areas of study emerging up through the beginning of the 21st century. Hans Delbrück (1848-1929), one the founding fathers of modern military history, sought not only to determine what happened on the battlefield, but also how it was connected to society. While much of what Delbrück had to say about that connection now seems dated, his military analysis remains influential. Perhaps his most important contribution was his argument that there were two poles of military strategy, attrition (*ermattungsstrategie*) and annihilation (*niederwerfundsstrategie*). Delbrück claimed to have extracted or derived these concepts from a careful reading of Clausewitz. Regardless of whether these concepts were, indeed, incipient in Clausewitz, they still provide a useful framework for approaching strategy and tactics. Most of the Zhou-Song conquest of China in the 10th century, for example, was a struggle to annihilate the armies of the various polities of southern and western China, while those polities often sought to slow down the campaigns and blunt those offensives through attrition.

Some of the things that Delbrück stressed in his research, like determining the actual numbers involved in a battle, often using real world constraints to overturn textual claims (*sachkritik*), became basic to the practice of military history. Arden Bucholz has described the influence on Delbrück's approach, "Like Hegel and Goethe, both essential to his education, Delbrück seldom lost the larger humanistic perspective. From Ranke, Delbrück carried forward a concern for historical realism and an understanding of the rigorous, explicit use of eye-witness primary accounts-often used against each other to find out "what really happened."[29] Yet Delbrück's approach was not generally acceptable: "All his life, Delbrück stood on the middle ground, with the military criticizing him as an outsider who presumed to read the law to the officers in their own domain, and university colleagues rejecting the study of war as intellectually illegitimate."[30] In many respects, very little has changed for military history.

There was little, however, in the way of specifically military history methodology, as distinct from historical methodology, for most of the 20th century. Indeed, it might be fair to say that there was little in the way of military history before World War Two; the history of wars was simply part of

29. Bucholz (1985): 170-171.
30. Bucholz (1985): 171.

regular history writing.[31] The few military histories that were available were later criticized as "drum and bugle history," because they emphasized the glory of war and battle. At the same time, the usually prominent place of wars in many general histories led many to believe that most "traditional" history was really military history. This has also been reflected in a perception that military history has traditionally been taught at American colleges and universities until anti-war protesters in the 1960s began to drive it from the curriculum.

There is no generally accepted definition of what constitutes military history, perhaps because few if any scholars who define themselves as military historians are particularly concerned with the issue.[32] While the history of a war, military campaign or army seems unquestionably to belong to the category of military history, other areas are less clear. Civil-military relations, war and memory (how wars are remembered or commemorated), war in cinema, and technology often straddle the edge of military history. An area like strategic thought may not really be a historical topic, even if it is a military topic. Of course, Clausewitz's writings on war and his strategic thinking profoundly influenced the writing and understanding of military history.

Clausewitz argued that, "War is merely the continuation of policy by other means," drawing a direct connection between a state's use of force against another state and foreign policy goals.[33] He did not remark upon the internal political use of war as a means of legitimation or its value in factional struggles. His basic position that war was a rational instrument of state policy was generally accepted until the latter half of the 20th century. At a minimum, most historical studies of warfare assumed that states waged war in a purposeful way, even if they did not cite Clausewitz's dictum to support that stance. This was not true outside of the field of history, where anthropologists, for example, dealt with war more with respect to social evolution, ethnicity and social violence.[34]

At the same time, a number of historians began studying war in new ways, perhaps most iconically for what some would call the "New Military History," Donald Engels' *Alexander the Great and the Logistics of the Macedonian Army*.[35] This shift was not always welcomed, with Peter Paret complaining that

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31. A significant number of ancient Greek and Roman histories devoted large sections to, or were entirely concerned with, military history. Foundational historical texts like Herodotus and Thucydides made war a basic part of history in the West.
32. For two prominent exceptions see Black (2004), and Morillo (2006).
33. Clausewitz (1976): 87.
34. See, for example, Whitehead & Neil (2000).
35. Engels (1980).

the New Military History "minimizes or even excludes the subject of combat." It is an approach where "we are asked to pay greater attention to the interaction of war with society, economics, politics and culture. The New Military History stands for an effort to integrate the study of military institutions and their actions more closely with other kinds of history."[36] John Keegan, for his part, forcefully opposed Clausewitz's position, arguing for a more "cultural" approach to war.[37] Victor Davis Hanson seconded Keegan's position in *The Western Way in War*.[38] Hanson argued more than just that war was a cultural act, but that the Western way of waging war that stemmed from the Ancient Greek approach to battle was a superior mode of warfare.

These different perspectives all try to move beyond a narrow focus on the battlefield. For a historian like Keegan or a classicist like Hanson, war is just part of culture and those searching for a rational explanation of war are misguided.[39] War is a meaningful cultural act that serves cultural purposes, not the rational pursuit of state interests. Of course, the notion that states exist and have interests was not accepted uniformly across all times and cultures. Clausewitz could assume this because it was true in his time and place. At the same time, however, Clausewitz was not trying to confine his conclusions about war as a historical phenomenon to only his own time; he sought to explain it as a universal process.

Keegan and Hanson's cultural arguments were tightly tied into the notion of ways in warfare, as we have discussed above. Their focus also emphasized the individual experience of war and combat over strategy and politics. This was consistent with a more general "cultural turn" in the humanities that was mostly ignored as a theoretical orientation by military historians.[40] The notable exception to this was John Lynn, who specifically sought to bring military history into the cultural turn and bridge the culture versus Clausewitz debate. Lynn argued in his 2003 book, *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture*, that

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36. Paret (1991): 10.
37. John Keegan(1993): 3-12.
38. Hanson (1989): xv-xix.
39. Inherent in the notion of a rational reason for war is the possibility that war can be avoided when all sides understand that wars are actually more costly than other solutions to conflicting interests.
40. Keegan and Hanson's anti-Clausewitzian position fits in well with the cultural turn, which came to prominence in the 1970s, though neither of them explicitly cited any of the relevant foundational texts. Keegan discusses anthropology only with respect to the insights it offers for primitive warfare, and only works concerned with warfare. Keegan (1993): 84-94.

war was partly rational and partly cultural.[41] Just as importantly, Lynn provides a model for the interaction of, as he puts it, the "Discourse on War" and the "Reality of War."[42]

These advances in theorizing war, or at least examining the discipline of military history, were sometimes accompanied by the addition of the military histories of non-Western cultures. Where a thinker like Clausewitz had sought universal knowledge through theorizing about Western military history and the warfare he had just personally experienced, John Keegan, Geoffrey Parker, Jeremy Black, Stephen Morillo and John Lynn, to name some prominent examples, used the military histories of non-Western cultures to universalize their arguments. These new, non-Western histories began quickly to erode the ways in warfare approach.

There is a natural chronological break between the works of Parker and Keegan, and the other authors. Both Parker and Keegan were entirely under the influence of the ways in warfare understanding of China, and their works reflect that. Black, Morillo and Lynn, while not entirely separated from the influence of the ways in warfare perspective, offer much more nuanced positions, in some instances trying to balance the earlier understanding with an obvious discomfort with making sweeping generalizations based on weak evidence.[43] New publications on Chinese military history in the 21st century have made it impossible simply to generalize from reading a translation of Sunzi. In 2002, David Graff and Robin Higham edited *A Military History of China*, and David Graff published *Medieval Chinese Warfare, 300-900*, the latter the most important book on Chinese military history in the West since *Chinese Ways in Warfare*.[44] Tellingly, Graff's monograph was published in a series edited by Jeremy Black.

This brings us to our second major issue, the Military Revolution hypothesis, first proposed by Michael Roberts and then altered and amplified in importance by Geoffrey Parker. The Military Revolution hypothesis argued that the adoption of gunpowder weapons, both handguns and cannon, stimulated military change in Europe between 1500 and 1800 that led to the rise of the early modern nation state. The Military Revolution hypothesis is also connected to the question of why China fell behind the West in military

41. Lynn (2003): 319.
42. Lynn (2003): 331-341.
43. See for example Morillo (2006): 20-21, where he tries to reconcile characterizing Chinese culture as anti-military through Sunzi by also mentioning Sima Qian's perspective.
44. Graff & Higham (2002b). Graff (2002a).

capability. Joseph Needham, the pioneering scholar of Chinese science and technology, posed the question in a broader way to include all science and technology, causing some to call this "the Needham question." Needham's response to this problem was to publish as much as he could on what had hitherto been the unknown but extensive, deep and long history of science and technology in China. Ultimately, Needham argued that while China did invent the true gun, it did not really exploit it the way the West did because the Chinese were anti-military by nature.

Needham's assertion of China's fundamental anti-military culture and the massive volume he wrote on gunpowder and gunpowder weapons bolstered the existing Western perspective that, while China invented gunpowder, it never really used it for war.[45] It was only in the West where the real value of gunpowder was realized and that this explained why guns only developed in Europe. Needham was strongly motivated to prove that gunpowder had, indeed, been invented first in China and not independently in Europe. He succeeded in proving the Chinese origin for gunpowder without effectively explaining why guns developed so much further in Europe by the 16th century. Yet as even Needham recognized, the Chinese had not just invented gunpowder, they had also invented the gun and used it in battle. Indeed, many of the sources Needham had used to prove that China was the first to invent gunpowder were military manuals. The supposedly anti-military Chinese literati had been responsible for composing and publishing a far longer and more extensive tradition of military manuals, works on strategy, and military encyclopedia than anywhere else in the world.

Kenneth Chase suggested another reason for China's slower development of the gun in his 2003 book, *Firearms: A Global History to 1700*.[46] According to Chase, it was the particular circumstances of warfare in the rest of the world that made guns less functional in battle than in Europe. Functionally, Chase removed the ways in warfare or cultural anti-militarism in favor of the practical realities of the specific battlefield problems of a given group. Chase also undercut the notion that history is driven by technology. As Bert Hall pointed out in his review of Chase's book, "Gunpowder is usually seen as the paradigm case where a dramatic shift in weaponry, representing humankind's first attempt to harness chemical energy directly, becomes the prime mover behind sweeping historical changes."[47] If historical and geographic circumstances powerfully

45. Needham (1986): 14. Needham argued against this erroneous Western idea but, judging by much of the literature that followed, unsuccessfully.
46. Chase (2003).
47. Hall (2005): 338.

affect the use of technology then the use of technology is a reflection of those conditions, not a driver of action.

My own 2008 book, *The Asian Military Revolution*, took up where Chase left off, both arguing that culture drives technology and engaging one of the main tenets of Parker's military revolution thesis, that guns caused the rise of the modern nation state. Guns were invented under the Song dynasty, a centralized, bureaucratic government with a standing army, but other polities and groups across Asia absorbed guns into their own circumstances in very different ways.[48] Technology is invented in one place and received everywhere else, but this is not a unidirectional flow. Improvements and new inventions circulate as needs and means require. There is no simple point and diffusion model and no single logical response to a given technology.

A great example of the clash between different modes of warfare is provided by Kenneth Swope in his 2009 book, *A Dragon's Head and A Serpent's Tail: Ming China and the First Great East Asian War, 1592-1598*. Swope shows the military history of Chinese cannon centered warfare against Japanese flintlock centered warfare in Korea at the end of the 16th century.[49] At a minimum, Swope demonstrates that guns were extensively used in East Asia long before the West opened up an enormous technological lead. The Japanese used copies of European muskets that they readily and eagerly brought into their battlefield operations. Cannon and handguns continued to play important roles in East Asia without break. Gunpowder weapons advanced more quickly in Europe and were imported into East Asia as they became available.

Both the Western way of war and the Military Revolution hypothesis required simple models of culture, technology and warfare. The collapse of the military revolution hypothesis, undermined just as much from the western side as from the comparative China side, parallels the collapse of the western way of war.[50] More detailed studies of warfare, western and non-western, demonstrated that these simple models were broadly and fundamentally inaccurate, making these positions untenable. The old paradigms, the Chinese

48. Lorge (2008).
49. Swope (2009).
50. Parker's book almost immediately stimulated a detailed response in Rogers (1995), and in that sense was never fully accepted. Jeremy Black has written many books concerning the subject, effectively dismantling every one of Parker's arguments. For one example see Black (2011). Some scholars do continue to support Parker's position. The western way of war has been systematically picked apart in its particulars by recent scholarship. See Kagan & Viggiano (2013), which also includes Hanson's response. More telling, perhaps, was a comment Stephen Morillo made at the 2012 Society for Military History conference, "What do you mean by the West?"

way in war, the Western way of war, and the Military Revolution have come to the end of their useful lives.

There is now a Chinese Military History Society, an academic journal, the *Journal of Chinese Military History*, and a regular presence at the annual meetings of the Society for Military History. Unfortunately, military history remains less prominent at the Association for Asian Studies meetings or in the *Journal of Asian Studies*. A small, but productive and growing number of scholars are publishing more and more studies of Chinese military history in a far more welcoming environment. New military histories like Kenneth Swope's *The Military Collapse of China's Ming Dynasty, 1618-1644* (2013), Ulrich Theobald's *War Finance and Logistics in Late Imperial China: A Study of the Second Jinchuan Campaign (1771-1776)* (2013) and Yingcong Dai's *The Sichuan Frontier and Tibet: Imperial Strategy in the Early Qing* (2011), show a step change in the rate of production, while new translations of early military texts like Olivia Millburn's *The Glory of Yue* (2010), Robin McNeal's *Conquer and Govern: Early Chinese Military Texts from the Yi Zhou Shu* (2012) and Andrew Seth Meyers' *The Dao of the Military: Liu An's Art of War* (2012) provide a broader range of works beyond Sunzi.[51]

Conclusion

It has now been forty years since the publication of *Chinese Ways in Warfare*. At that time, there was very little Chinese military history available in the West or East Asia and only a slightly larger amount available on Chinese military thought. The general consensus was that war was not important in Chinese history or culture, the Chinese had a unique way of warfare that deemphasized force in favor of clever stratagems, and Sunzi presented an "indirect approach" to strategy that contrasted with the western "direct approach" described by Clausewitz. This consensus fed into explanations of why China's lead in gunpowder weapons did not translate into the modern period, and why its culture went into relative decline with respect to the West in the 19th century. Ideas about the place of warfare in Chinese history were directly connected to broader interpretations of both Chinese and Western history.

Chinese military history has thus inherited a leverage point where it can influence the interpretations of Chinese history, early modern Western history, and world history. China's long tradition of history writing is unequaled by

51. Theobald (2013); Yingcong Dai (2011); Millburn (2010); McNeal (2012); Meyer (2012).

any other culture, making it the natural comparison for any argument about historical development. This same history-writing tradition provided a much fuller description of the past, where wars and military matters were an important part of what happened but not the entirety of the account. The Western historical tradition was much smaller and proportionally more occupied with warfare. It is not that the West was more militarily oriented, or China less so, but rather that a historiographical artifact has made it seem so.

If we can now see China as no less martial in its history, then we can begin to examine much more nuanced historical questions. All Chinese dynasties were created through immense wars, yet, unlike in the West, some of those dynasties lasted for three or four centuries. For reasons still unexplained, the Chinese were often much better at using warfare to create stable political entities controlling large territories than, for example, Western Europeans after the Roman empire fell. Chinese dynasties did not simply come into being without effort or violence, nor was their collapse an unnatural disordering of fundamental Chinese unity and peace. Violence was one of the most important means for creating and maintaining dynasties. When a leader or group of leaders applied it skillfully they could create an empire and dynasty and maintain themselves in the face of internal or external threats. Chinese dynasties rose and fell on their ability to use violence effectively. This is an unpleasant fact, but no less true for all our reluctance to accept that the Chinese did not have a special power to wield political power without force.

Chinese military history has become part of the discipline of military history and is contributing to a new, broader and more inclusive approach to the subject. The rise of Chinese military history has fortunately occurred at a time of dynamic change in western military history. Military history itself has gained greater acceptance among academic historians, or at least somewhat less resistance, and it is important for China to have a military history too. As China gains a military history, it will become a more "normal" subject of comparison rather than an exotic and abstract other. It will cease to be that strange place where wars didn't happen and the elites had no interest in military matters, yet it somehow invented perhaps the most consequential military technology in human history. Putting war into Chinese history thus puts Chinese history into history itself.

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Glossaire

Ao 鏖
Analects Lunyu 論語
Archer Yi 后羿
Art of War Bingfa 兵法
Cao Cao 曹操
Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石
Confucius 孔子
Duke Huan 齊桓公
Guan Zhong 管仲
Li Quan 李筌
Mao Zedong 毛澤東
Mei Yaochen 梅堯臣
Mencius 孟子
Seven Military Classics Wujingqishu 武經七書
Songben Shiyi Jiazhu Sunzi (Zhongguo Bingshu Jicheng) 宋本十一家注孫子（中國兵書集成）
Spring and Autumn Annals Chunqiu 春秋
Sun Bin 孫臏

Sunzi 孫子
Tian Dan 田單
Wang Xi 王晳
Wu Qi 吳起
Yang Zhuluan 揚壟欒
Zhang Yu 張預
Zigong 子貢